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THE ALGONKIN MANITOU.¹

THE Algonkin conception of the manitou is bound up with the manifold ideas that flow from an unconscious relation with the outside world. It is embodied in all forms of religious belief and practice, and is intimately associated with customs and usages that bear upon life and its welfare. It is the purpose in the following pages to give simply, and in as few words as possible, the meaning of the manitou as it is understood by three Algonkin peoples — the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo. All three speak related dialects of the same language; all three have a similar form of society; and all three have much the same religious rites and practices. It will be convenient to refer to them collectively, and when the reference is made the term Algonkin shall be used; the term shall apply to them only, and not to other units of the same family.

In the first place the term manitou is a religious word; it carries with it the idea of solemnity; and whatever the association it always expresses a serious attitude, and kindles an emotional sense of mystery. The conceptions involved in its use can best be shown by taking up some features of Algonkin religion.

The essential character of Algonkin religion is a pure, naïve worship of nature. In one way or another associations cluster about an object and give it a certain potential value; and because of this supposed potentiality, the object becomes the recipient of an adoration. The degree of the adoration depends in some measure upon the extent of confidence reposed in the object, and upon its supposed power of bringing pleasure or inflicting pain. The important thing with the individual is the emotional effect experienced while in the presence of the object, or with an interpreted manifestation of the object. The individual keeps watch for the effect, and it is the effect that fills the mind with a vague sense of something strange, something mysterious, something intangible. One feels it as the result of an active substance, and one's attitude toward it is purely passive.

To experience a thrill is authority enough of the existence of the substance. The sentiment of its reality is made known by the fact that something has happened. It is futile to ask an Algonkin for an articulate definition of the substance, partly because it would be something about which he does not concern himself, and partly because he is quite satisfied with only the sentiment of its existence. He feels that the property is everywhere, is omnipresent. The feeling

¹ The quotations and references throughout this paper are from notes and Algonkin texts collected in work for the American Museum of Natural History, New York city.

that it is omnipresent leads naturally to the belief that it enters into everything in nature ; and the notion that it is active causes the mind to look everywhere for its manifestations. These manifestations assume various forms, they vary with individuals and with reference to the same and different objects. Language affords means of approaching nearer to a definition of this religious sentiment.

In the Algonkin dialects of the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo, a rigid distinction of gender is made between things with life and things without life. When they speak of a stone they employ a form which expresses the inanimate character of the stone ; in the same way, when they speak of a dog they use another form which indicates the animate nature of the dog. Accordingly, when they refer to the manitou in the sense of a virtue, a property, an abstraction, they employ the form expressive of inanimate gender. When the manitou becomes associated with an object, then the gender becomes less definite. Some reasons for this confusion will become evident farther on.

When the property becomes the indwelling element of an object, then it is natural to identify the property with animate being. It is not necessary that the being shall be the tangible representative of a natural object. To illustrate a concrete instance of this sentiment, here is the comment made by a Fox apropos of an experience in the sweat lodge : " Often one will cut one's self over the arms and legs, slitting one's self only through the skin. It is done to open up many passages for the manitou to pass into the body. The manitou comes from the place of its abode in the stone. It becomes roused by the heat of the fire, and proceeds out of the stone when the water is sprinkled on it. It comes out in the steam, and in the steam it enters the body wherever it finds entrance. It moves up and down and all over inside the body, driving out everything that inflicts pain. Before the manitou returns to the stone it imparts some of its nature to the body. That is why one feels so well after having been in the sweat lodge."

The sentiment behind the words rests upon the consciousness of a belief in an objective presence ; it rests on the sense of an existing reality with the quality of self-dependence ; it rests on the perception of a definite, localized personality. Yet at the same time there is the feeling that the apprehended reality is without form and without feature. This is the dominant notion in regard to the virtue abiding in the stone of the sweat lodge ; it takes on the character of conscious personality with some attributes of immanence and design.

Falling in line with what has just gone before is the belief that the virtue can be transferred from one object to another. The virtue in both objects is of the same fundamental nature, but of different degree and of unequal value. In the transfer, the virtue of one

object reinforces that of the other. Such is the idea implied in the following abridged narrative.

A body of Sauks had wandered out on the Plains in search of buffalo. While approaching a vast herd they came unexpectedly upon some Comanches who were much fewer than they and who were creeping upon the same herd. The Sauks rushed them, and the Comanches at once took to flight. But in the pursuit the Sauks were delayed by a lone Comanche. He had chosen to sacrifice his life in order to give his comrades a chance to escape. He accomplished his purpose. The man's deed and the bravery he displayed aroused a feeling of admiration from his foes. And out of honor for the man they chose not to take his scalp nor to count coup upon him. But instead they cut out his heart. Passing it around, they all ate of it.

So much for the narrative in brief. To the Algonkin the heart was endued with the manitou, the sense of the manitou being an impersonal essence, a supernatural virtue. The men ate the heart to get its supernatural quality. They believed that the quality was what made the Comanche so brave, and that by eating the heart they could come into possession of its quality. They felt that it would react upon them in the same way as it had upon the Comanche; and furthermore, that the combined effect of the quality within them and what was in the Comanche would render it possible for them to become better fighters than they could otherwise have become. The example betrays the reliance placed upon the help of the cosmic substance rather than upon human aid. The reliance does not rest upon a random hope, but on an assurance that the expected will come to pass with a happy result.

It is natural to confuse the property with an object containing the property. The confusion is frequently met with in what are considered mediums of manifestations. For instance, there is an Algonkin story which contains an episode of the cosmic hero taking upon himself the form of a pretty maiden. The girl comes to a lodge where she is entertained by an aged woman. The old woman prepares two grains of corn and a bean, and putting them into a small bowl, invites the girl to eat. The girl nibbles one grain at a time, and for every grain that is taken out, there is always another to take its place. Finally the girl eats up the food and returns the vessel empty to the hostess. The old woman looks with wonder at the empty bowl, and then turning to the girl, remarks, "You must be a manitou!"

It is desirable to point out two arrestive features, arrestive to the sense of an Algonkin who is a passive, uncritical listener to the tale. One is the continued multiplication of the food, and the other is the interruption of the performance. One's unconscious feeling about the food is that its recurrence was due to the work of the impersonal,

mystic property with which the food was charged and because of which it was replenished; and that the amazement of the old woman was due to the surprise felt at the sight of a miraculous interruption of a miraculous multiplying process. She laid the cause to the girl, whom she addressed as an animate form of the substance. Naming her an animate manitou was the same as making the property and the creature one and the same thing.

Here is another story which illustrates the ambiguity, but in a different relation. It is the story of a man and his wife who had gone off on a distant hunt for game. One evening they caught sight of some Sioux who had been shadowing them. In the gathering darkness and during a drizzling rain they set out in flight. The Sioux were moving about them on every side, and were signalling back and forth with the cries of birds and animals in an effort to locate the pair.

Despairing of escape by their own help, the man and his wife stopped and dismounted. The man was not able to get into *rapport* with the mystery, and so called upon his wife. In a little while she heard words coming to her from on high. They were words spoken to her by her elder brother when she was a child; he had spoken them during a fast and on the day he had died. They were: "If ever in the course of your life you meet with adversity, then think of me." With these words were others telling how she and her husband should escape. The story goes on to tell how the pair followed the advice and how they made their escape.

The story has one purpose: it is to tell of deliverance by the help of a transcendent agency; in this case it is an elder brother who comes as a mystic apparition invested with the cosmic substance, and having the attribute of prophecy and guidance.

Further instances of the confusion are to be found in the narratives of individual experiences in trance and dream transport. Boys and girls begin early to practise seclusion, and at the time refrain from touching food. During the earlier periods the fasting is of short duration, and with hardly any further meaning than that of a preparation for the ordeals yet to come; the performance becomes more serious during adolescence, and it is of the utmost importance during maturity. One then fasts and keeps vigil in the hope of gaining insight into the mystery of life. One adjusts one's self to a particular mental attitude, and so goes seriously prepared to see, to hear, and to feel. In this mental condition one sometimes sees strange objects, one sometimes hears prophetic warnings, and one sometimes feels the spell of an all-pervading presence. It is during one or more of these experiences that one is said to come into possession of hidden revelation.

Vision does not come to every one that fasts. But when one is fortunate enough to experience a mystic transport at the sight of something animate, or inanimate, then one is apt to make that object an ideal of divine guidance. Of or through it one invokes aid in the critical moments of life. It is not easy for an Algonkin to convey a definite idea of the nature of the object: it may be the inanimate, mystic property, or it may be a medium of the property. Much depends upon what the individual reads into the manifestation, and this in turn is colored by instruction received before the transport.

Some, however, do not see the objects themselves, but they hear their sounds or their voices. To judge from the testimony of individuals who have had the transport, it would seem that it is more common to hear than to see. The words caught convey a profound sense of authority; they must influence the course of one's actions. It is from this kind of experience that some claim to have derived sacred songs and forms of ritual. It was from this source that came the Ghost-dance, at least so was it taught the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo. Its ritual, its songs, its step, its teaching were all said to have been revealed to a young woman, who in turn transmitted it all to the people of her nation.

The most common experience seems to be that of being overwhelmed by an all-encompassing presence. It is an experience least susceptible of an articulate report, and yet it is the one looked upon as the source of greatest authority. It is not easy to induce an Algonkin to speak of any of these experiences. It is even urged upon the individual never to reveal the details except on particular occasions, and in critical moments like that of approaching death. Many of them, however, have passed into tradition, and here is the shortened account of one of the experiences:—

A youth once accompanied a party of warriors on a raid against a people of the Plains. The party was beaten and the youth was killed. In accordance with an Algonkin custom, the family of the slain adopted another youth to take the place left vacant by death. The adopted youth had been a bosom friend of the slain. The act of his adoption placed upon him the responsibility of avenging the death of his friend.

Before entering upon the mission he went, as was the custom, into a fast, that he might obtain mystic guidance. Accordingly, so goes the story, the youth had a vision, and there was open to him a view of the battlefield where his friend had been slain, of the location of the enemy that had caused the death, and of the path to be taken in order to come upon the foe. And in the vision he saw himself eating of the enemy. This last was for him a symbol that his mission would have a happy issue.

The narrative is typical of the more usual forms of revelation. The youth had gone primed to meet with a particular experience; he received tidings of just the sort of thing he was looking for. It is not easy to find out how much of this sort of thing is fraud. Beyond doubt there is some fabrication, and much is read into an experience; but there is also reason to believe that it is seldom done with intent, and that it is usually the result of an unconscious self-deception. The visitation is attributed to animate beings. "The manitou beings have taken pity upon me" is the stock phrase uttered by one coming out of such a vision. These "beings" are not tangible realities. The term manitou beings is but an intelligible form of expressing the exciting cause; it is more natural to identify the communication with animate beings, in spite of the consciousness that the beings themselves are vague and inarticulate.

There is no doubt in an Algonkin's mind about the reality of these revelations; the feeling that one saw something arrestive, that one heard impressive voices, that one was overcome by an objective, mysterious presence is proof enough to establish the reality of the revelation. But it is doubtful if an Algonkin would think of going into the question of authority. One is sure of it, but why, one does not know, any more than that it is the inspired assurance of a transcendent agency.

The interpretation of the cause of the revelation varies with individuals. If the cause is something present to the thought, then it is likely the work of the mystic activity. This is the interpretation sometimes given by one who has been overcome by the presence of the mystery without form and without feature. In another sense and one more frequent, it is the effect of the combined presence of all the manitou beings taken together. If the object of the revelation be present to the sense, then the interpretation is liable to confusion. For instance, if the revealing object be an owl, then the interpretation is likely to take one or the other of these two forms: either the owl is a vessel or conveyance of the property; or else the owl is the property itself. In the first case, the manitou manifests itself through the agency of an owl. The notion here of a difference between the object and what it contains differentiates the vessel from the property. In the other case, the property becomes so intimately associated with the object that the object and the property come to be one and the same. The confusion of the object and the property does away with the consciousness of any differentiation. The personification is easy and of unconscious mould. The notion that the object and the property are one and the same thing is the interpretation one more commonly meets with. The sense of incongruity or improbability does not enter to disturb the mind.

So universal and easy is this lack of mental discrimination that it is no trouble for an Algonkin to invest an object with the mystic substance, and then call the object by the name of the substance. The process suggests a possible explanation of how an Algonkin comes to people his world with manitou forces different in kind and degree; it explains in some measure the supernatural performances of mythological beings, the beings that move in the form of men, beasts, birds, fishes, and other objects of nature. All these are a collection of agencies. Each possesses a virtue in common with all the rest, and in so far do they all have certain marks of agreement. Where one differs from another is in the nature of its function, and in the degree of the possession of the cosmic substance. But the investment of a common, mystic virtue gives them all a common name, and that name is manitou.

The emotional effect produced by the strange but sincere regard for the manitou explains much of the esoteric sentiment felt for a myth, a tradition, a form of ritual, or anything whatsoever connected with a ceremonial practice. An Algonkin holds that the proper time to recite a myth is in winter, and that its recitation shall be attended with some kind of formality; and that to tell a myth out of season and without formality is to take chances with something beyond human power. It requires but a gentle scare to set one who has committed the infraction into a state of mental confusion. The sentiment behind the myth rests on the naïve belief that the myth may be either the supernatural property or an agent of the property. Hence, to play lightly with it is like playing lightly with any other idealized object associated with the supernatural substance. The infraction creates a feeling of unrest, a disturbing sense of insecurity.

In the same way one needs to seek for a psychological reason to explain why an Algonkin feels reluctant to speak about a sacred ceremony except in moments propitious and opportune. The ceremonial lodge is a holy symbol; it means a place where one can enter into communication with higher powers, where with sacrifice and offering, with music and dance one obtains audience and can ask for things beyond human control; it means a place where one can forget the material world and enjoy the experience of that magic spell which one feels is the sign that not only is one in the presence of the supernatural property, but in that of the beings who hold it in high degree. It is a function with a very definite purpose. It is to invoke the presence of an objective reality; the objectified ideal may be animate or inanimate. And the effect is in the nature of a pleasing thrill, a sense of resignation, a consolation. This effect is the proof of the presence of the manitou.

It has thus been observed that there is an unsystematic belief in a cosmic, mysterious property which is believed to be existing everywhere in nature ; that the conception of the property can be thought of as impersonal, but that it becomes obscure and confused when the property becomes identified with objects in nature ; that it manifests itself in various forms ; and that its emotional effect awakens a sense of mystery ; that there is a lively appreciation of its miraculous efficacy ; and that its interpretation is not according to any regular rule, but is based on one's feelings rather than on one's knowledge.

Such in very brief statement is the conception of the manitou of three Algonkin peoples, — the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo. It seems probable that the same thing holds true of other Algonkins, like the Ojibwas, Ottawas, Menominees, and others of the central group. It would be interesting to know if the same conception in its general features extends to all the other members of the family.

William Fones.